Relics and Peace: How Custodians Protect Buddhist Faith and Culture

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Abstract

This research looks at **Buddha's sacred relics** and the people who care for them from a **peace studies perspective**. The main question is:

How do the custodians of Buddha's relics act as agents of peace, cultural heritage protection, and social harmony?

The study uses only **internal Buddhist sources**: Pāli suttas and Vinaya in translation, *The Questions of King Milinda*, and modern handbooks connected with a Buddha tooth relic preservation museum. These texts are read through ideas from peace studies, such as **negative peace** (absence of violence) and **positive peace** (presence of justice, safety, and good relationships).

First, the thesis shows that early Buddhism is deeply concerned with peace. The Buddha often thinks of the **"security of beings"**, gives methods to settle disputes in the Saṅgha, and lays down rules "for the welfare and happiness of many." Nibbāna is presented as the highest peace, but social harmony is also clearly valued.

Second, the study explains how Buddha's relics are understood in the texts. They are not only physical remains but **supports for faith, memory, and practice**. Relic shrines are described as places where humans and devas perform meritorious actions that lead towards liberation.

Third, the thesis argues that **custodians of relics**—monastics, lay committees, and modern museum staff—are also **guardians of the sāsana**. They protect both material and intangible heritage, manage access and rituals, and shape the ethical atmosphere around relic sites.

Finally, the research explores both **positive roles** and **risks**. Relic shrines can be moral classrooms, safe spaces, and centres of peace education. But they can also become points of conflict, superstition,

commercialisation, or political misuse if guided by greed, hatred, and ignorance.

The conclusion proposes a model of **peace-oriented relic custodianship** that links Buddhist faith, cultural heritage work, and peacebuilding, and suggests that wise custodians can help turn sacred relics into strong supports for social harmony.

Introduction

Across Buddhist Asia, the bodily relics of the Buddha – enshrined in stupas, temples, and museums – continue to draw millions of devotees. These sacred remains are not only objects of veneration; they are also powerful symbols of continuity, identity, and hope. Around them, communities build rituals, festivals, educational programmes, and institutions. The people and organisations who care for these relics – monks, nuns, lay committees, heritage professionals, and state authorities – are the *custodians* of a tradition that is at once religious and cultural. Their decisions about how relics are preserved, displayed, and interpreted can strengthen faith, support social harmony, and protect cultural heritage. They can also, if handled unwisely, become sources of tension and conflict.

Peace studies offers a useful lens for examining these dynamics. It distinguishes between negative peace – the absence of direct violence – and positive peace, the presence of justice, cooperation, and harmonious relationships. From this perspective, religious sites and symbols are not neutral. They can either contribute to positive peace by fostering ethical conduct, mutual respect, and shared identity, or they can be used to justify exclusion, rivalry, and prejudice. In many societies, struggles over religious heritage, sacred spaces, and relics have become flashpoints for wider political and social tensions. Understanding the role of relic custodians, therefore, is not only a matter of religious history; it is a question with real implications for peace and conflict in contemporary communities.

The early Buddhist texts preserved in the Sutta and Vinaya collections repeatedly emphasise the value of concord (saṃagga) and warn against schism (saṅghabheda) in the monastic community, describing harmony in the Saṅgha as a cause of welfare and happiness for many beings. They also explain disciplinary rules as being laid down for the excellence and stability of the Order, for the restraint of the harmful, and for the protection and increase of faith. Later texts such as *The Questions of King Milinda* defend the building of relic shrines, arguing that they provide a foundation for the performance of meritorious actions and support the path to liberation. Modern practice-oriented manuals linked to relic institutions continue this logic, presenting relic sites as centres where study (pariyatti), practice (paṭipatti), and realisation (paṭivedha) are encouraged, and where ethical training – for example, keeping the five precepts – is explicitly connected to the protection of individuals and society.

Taken together, these sources suggest that Buddha's relics and their custodians occupy a key intersection between Buddhist faith, cultural heritage, and social harmony. Relics anchor the memory of the Buddha in material form; they transmit narratives, values, and practices across generations; and they gather diverse groups into shared spaces of devotion. Custodians are responsible not only for the physical care of relics, but also for the moral, educational, and relational environment that grows around them. They can design programmes that promote generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom, or practices that reinforce hierarchy, competition, and fear. They can manage relics as inclusive heritage that belongs to the wider community, or as symbols of possession that mark boundaries between "us" and "them."

This study explores these issues by asking: How do the custodians of Buddha's sacred relics function as agents of peace, cultural heritage protection, and social harmony? More specifically:

1. How are relics and their custodians portrayed in early Buddhist texts and later commentarial or dialogical literature?

2. In what ways are relics treated as forms of cultural heritage – preserving memory, identity, and ethical teaching – in both canonical sources and modern handbooks?

3. How can the work of relic custodians contribute to positive peace, and what risks arise when relics become entangled in conflict, schism, or moral degeneration?

The research is based entirely on internal sources: Pali canonical and Vinaya material in translation, classical post-canonical texts, and contemporary Dhamma manuals associated with relic institutions (such as a Buddha tooth relic preservation museum). By reading these materials through a peace studies lens, the project aims to show how traditional Buddhist concerns – the maintenance of the True Dhamma, the prevention of schism, the cultivation of wholesome roots, and the ethical training of lay communities – can be understood as elements of a broader vision of social harmony and cultural resilience.

The thesis is organised as follows. The first chapter introduces basic concepts from peace studies and shows how early Buddhist texts provide their own vocabulary for peace, concord, and security for beings. The second chapter examines how the canonical and classical texts present Buddha's relics and the practice of relic veneration. The third chapter turns to the role of custodians, drawing on Vinaya regulations and modern institutional examples to understand custodianship as a form of guardianship of the *sāsana* and of heritage. The fourth chapter analyses relics as cultural heritage, looking at how they preserve memory, ritual, and teaching for faith communities. The fifth chapter explores the ethical and social

dimensions of relic-centred practice, linking precepts, wholesome mental roots, and community behaviour to positive peace. The sixth chapter considers the risks: how conflicts over relics, moral confusion, and schismatic tendencies can undermine peace and harmony, and what responsibilities custodians have as peacebuilders.

By bringing together textual study, heritage concerns, and peace studies perspectives, this research seeks to highlight the constructive role that Buddhist relic custodians can play in nurturing communities that are both deeply rooted in their own faith and committed to social harmony.

Chapter 1 Peace Studies and Early Buddhism: Concepts and Connections

1.1 Purpose of this Chapter

This chapter builds the basic ideas for this research. The thesis studies Buddha's sacred relics from a peace studies perspective. To do that, we first need to understand what "peace" means in peace studies, and how early Buddhist texts speak about peace, safety, and harmony.

In this chapter I will:

1. Explain some simple ideas from peace studies.

2. Show how early Buddhist teachings talk about inner and outer peace.

3. Connect these ideas with the Buddha's concern for the welfare and security of beings.

4. Show that Buddhist discipline (Vinaya) and practice are designed not only for personal liberation, but also for social

harmony and protection of the community.

This conceptual base will later support the discussion on the custodians of Buddha's sacred relics, and how relics can be part of Buddhist faith, cultural heritage, and social harmony.

1.2 Basic Concepts in Peace Studies

Peace studies is a modern field that looks at the causes of conflict and ways to build peace at different levels: within the person, between people, in communities, and between nations. In a simple way, peace studies often makes a distinction between:

- Negative peace – the absence of direct violence, such as war or physical harm.

- Positive peace – the presence of justice, cooperation, trust and social structures that support well-being.

Peace studies is also interested in:

- Inner peace – the calm mind and emotional balance of a person.

- Structural peace – fair systems, laws and institutions that reduce suffering and conflict.

When we read early Buddhist texts with these ideas in mind, we can see that they speak about peace on all these levels, even if they use different words. Concepts like *khema* (security/safety), *santa* (peaceful), and the "welfare and happiness of many beings" show a clear concern for both inner and outer peace.

1.3 Early Buddhist Understanding of Peace

In early Buddhism, peace is not only the absence of war. It is closely linked with the end of suffering (*dukkha*) and the removal of its causes. The Buddha describes suffering and its origin in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths:

1. There is suffering (stress, dissatisfaction).
2. Suffering has causes (craving and ignorance).
3. Suffering can end (cessation).
4. There is a path leading to that end.

In one passage, "birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair" are all included under suffering. This shows that peace in Buddhism is very deep: it is not only social peace, but freedom from the mental and existential stress that marks the whole cycle of life and death.

Later Theravāda analysis explains that unwholesome states are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, while wholesome states are rooted in their absence. A modern handbook based on early teachings explains that all unskillful qualities "have a share in what's unskillful" and are rooted in ignorance, while skillful qualities have their roots in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. From a peace studies perspective, we can say that the roots of violence and conflict are mental and ethical, and the Buddhist path tries to cut these roots.

The highest peace is Nibbāna, which is described with many names such as "unformed", "truth", "safe", "sorrowless", "deathless" and "island, refuge, cave, shelter". These epithets show that Nibbāna is seen as a secure and unshakable state, beyond danger and fear.

1.4 The Buddha's Thought of Security for Beings

The Itivuttaka records a short discourse where the Buddha says that two thoughts often occur to him:

1. The thought of security for beings
2. The thought of solitude

The text explains that the Buddha delights in non-ill will. Because he enjoys non-ill will, the thought comes to him:

> "By this behaviour I do not oppress anyone either frail or firm."

He also delights in solitude, and because of this he knows that what is unwholesome has been abandoned. The Buddha then tells the monks that they too should live delighting in non-ill will and solitude, so that the same thoughts arise in them.

From a peace studies perspective, this passage is very important. It shows that:

- The Buddha consciously thinks about security for beings.
- Peaceful behaviour is defined as not oppressing anyone, whether weak or strong.
- Inner peace (solitude, absence of unwholesome states) and social peace (non-oppression) are linked.

This gives a strong scriptural basis for seeing the Buddha not only as a teacher of personal liberation, but also as a thinker deeply concerned with the safety and well-being of all beings.

1.5 Concord, Conflict, and the Welfare of Many

The early texts also show a clear concern with maintaining harmony in the community. In one passage, the Buddha lists seven methods for settling disputes in the Saṅgha:

- A face-to-face verdict
- A verdict of mindfulness
- A verdict of past insanity
- Acting according to what is admitted
- Acting according to the majority
- Further punishment where needed
- "Covering over as with grass"

These methods are to be recited together "without dispute" so that the holy life will last long and "be for the benefit and happiness of many, out of sympathy for the world, for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of devas and human beings."

Here we can see several important peace-related ideas:

- Institutional tools for conflict resolution – formal ways to deal with disputes.
- Concern for long-term stability – so that the holy life "will endure and last a long time".

- Universal compassion – “sympathy for the world… welfare and happiness of devas and human beings.”

Another passage shows the Buddha encouraging the monks to cultivate key qualities such as mindfulness, energy, and the factors of awakening, so that “this holy life may long endure and remain steadfast for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of the multitude, out of sympathy for the world.” Again, the emphasis is on both duration and public benefit.

From a peace studies viewpoint, we can say that the Buddha is trying to build institutional peace inside the Saṅgha. He gives procedures, virtues, and shared practices that reduce conflict and protect the community. This will later be a useful lens to analyse how the guardians of sacred relics should act to maintain harmony and trust.

1.6 The Ten Reasons for Rules: A Vinaya View of Social Peace

The Vinaya explains that rules of training are laid down by the Tathāgata “founded on ten reasons”:

1. For the excellence of the Order
2. For the comfort of the Order
3. For the restraint of evil-minded individuals
4. For the living in comfort of well-behaved monks
5. For the control of present cankers (defilements)
6. For the combating of future cankers
7. For the benefit of non-believers

8. For the increase in the number of believers

9. For the maintenance of the True Dhamma

10. For the furthering of Discipline

The text then shows how these reasons are connected, saying that what is for the excellence of the Order is also for its comfort, for the restraint of evil-minded persons, for the well-being of good monks, and so on, up to the maintenance of the true Dhamma and the furthering of discipline.

Seen from peace studies, these ten reasons create a very clear framework:

- Internal peace – restraint of evil-minded individuals, control of cankers.

- Communal peace – comfort and excellence of the Order, living in ease for well-behaved monks.

- Public peace and trust – benefit of non-believers and increase of believers.

- Historical peace – maintenance of the true Dhamma and discipline over time.

This is very relevant to our study of relic custodians. Guardians of sacred relics can understand their role in a similar way:

- Protecting the moral image and excellence of the Buddhist community.

- Creating safe and respectful spaces for practice.
- Helping non-Buddhists and local communities to see the Dhamma as a source of benefit.
- Keeping the heritage alive and pure for the future.

1.7 Nibbāna as the Ground of Peace

A practical handbook on dependent origination, based on classical sources, describes Nibbāna as "freedom-nature" and "peace-quality," with terms like *santa* (peaceful), *asoka* (without sorrow), *khema* (safe/secure), and *suddhi* (purity). It also notes "protection images" such as "island (dīpa), refuge (tāṇa), cave (leṇa), shelter" that are used in the texts.

Nibbāna is not presented as a physical place, but as the cessation of craving, suffering, and their causes. The text warns against reifying "the Unconditioned" as a substance; it should be understood functionally as the end of affliction.

For peace studies, this is very important:

- Ultimate peace in Buddhism is the end of inner conflict and ignorance.
- This inner liberation supports non-violence and compassionate action in the world.
- The images of "island", "refuge", and "shelter" can be used to think about Buddhist sacred spaces – including relic shrines – as symbolic reminders of this ultimate safety.

When communities gather around relics, they are not only honouring the physical remains of the Buddha. They are also honouring the peace and safety that Nibbāna represents. This connection between symbol and meaning will be explored later in the thesis.

1.8 Mental Roots of Violence and Peace

As mentioned above, the canonical analysis shows that unskillful actions arise from greed, hatred, and delusion, while skillful actions arise from non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. A modern summary of these teachings explains that all unskillful qualities "side with what is unskillful" and are rooted in ignorance.

From a peace studies angle, we can see:

- Violence and conflict are related to mental states of craving, aversion, and confusion.

- Peaceful behaviour is linked to generosity, goodwill, and wisdom.

This mental framework will be useful later when we look at the behaviour of relic custodians. If the guardians act from greed (for money, power, fame), hatred (towards other groups), or delusion (misunderstanding the purpose of relics), their actions may create conflict and mistrust. If they act from non-greed, goodwill, and wisdom, their guardianship can support social harmony and inter-group respect.

1.9 Association, Community, and Moral Character

Another Itivuttaka passage states that beings of similar character associate with each other: "Beings of low disposition associate… with

beings of low disposition. Beings of good disposition associate… with beings of good disposition." The verses warn that bad companions pull one down, like a person on a plank sinking in the ocean.

This has a clear social message:

- Communities are shaped by the moral quality of their associations.

- If custodians and faithful followers gather around relics with wrong motives, the whole environment can become corrupt.

- If they gather with pure intentions and good discipline, the place can become a centre of peace.

The text also warns against imposters in the yellow robe who behave badly and "are born in hell" because of their evil deeds. From a peace perspective, this shows how hypocrisy damages both personal future and social trust.

1.10 Peace, Discipline, and the Image of the Saṅgha

The Vinaya gives many examples where the Buddha corrects behaviour that harms the public image of the Saṅgha. For instance, when monks join sham battles and are injured, people mock them and say that such behaviour is "not profitable" even for lay people, who go to fights only for livelihood and family. The Buddha then lays down rules to prevent this.

Similarly, rules are made so that thieves wearing symbols of crime, or those in a king's service, should not be allowed to go forth, because such cases disturb and frighten the public.

From a peace studies view, this shows that:

- The Buddha is attentive to social perception and public safety.
- Ethical discipline is not only a private matter; it protects trust between the Saṅgha and society.
- A peaceful community must act in ways that do not cause fear, confusion, or scandal.

Later, when we look at the role of relic custodians, these examples will help us think about how their conduct affects public trust and inter-religious harmony.

1.11 Towards a Peace Studies Framework for Relic Custodianship

From the internal sources we have seen, we can already outline a simple framework that will guide the later chapters:

1. Inner Peace and Liberation
    - Based on the Four Noble Truths and the end of craving and ignorance.
    - Highest form is Nibbāna, described as safe, peaceful, sorrowless and deathless.
2. Compassionate Concern for the Security of Beings
    - The Buddha's thought of "security for beings" and non-oppression.

3. Institutional and Communal Peace
    - Dispute-settling methods for the Saṅgha, designed "for the benefit and happiness of many".
    - Ten reasons for rules, balancing inner discipline and public benefit.
4. Moral Roots of Peace and Violence
    - Greed, hatred and delusion as roots of unskillful action; their absence as roots of skillful action.
5. Association and Social Character
    - The quality of companions and leaders shapes the whole community.

In the later chapters, this framework can be applied in more detail to:

- Historical and present-day practices around Buddha's relics.
- The role and responsibilities of custodians.
- The use of relic shrines as spaces of dialogue, reconciliation, and cultural heritage protection.

1.12 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that early Buddhist texts and later Theravāda analysis contain rich material for a peace studies perspective. The Buddha's thought of security for beings, his concern for the welfare of many, the Vinaya's ten reasons for rules, and the emphasis on inner transformation all point to a vision where personal liberation and social harmony support each other.

Chapter 2 Buddha's Sacred Relics in the Canonical Tradition

2.1 Purpose of This Chapter

In Chapter 1, we looked at peace studies and early Buddhist ideas about peace, security, and social harmony. We saw that the Buddha is not only interested in personal liberation, but also in the welfare and happiness of many beings, and in harmony in the Saṅgha.

In this chapter, we focus on one special topic inside this larger picture: Buddha's sacred relics. We will ask:

1. How do early Buddhist texts and related classical literature describe the relics of the Buddha?

2. What is the meaning and purpose of building shrines and stupas for these relics?

3. How do these shrines connect to faith, merit, and the presence of the Buddha in the world?

4. How do later teachers, especially those connected with a Buddha tooth relic museum, continue this tradition?

By answering these questions, we prepare the ground for later chapters, where we will talk about custodians of relics and the role they can play in cultural heritage and social harmony.

2.2 Words and Categories for Relics

In the Pāli tradition, several words are connected to what we call "relics":

- Dhātu – literally “element”, often used for bodily relics of the Buddha and great disciples.

- Cetiya – a shrine or memorial.

- Thūpa – a stupa or mound which usually contains relics or commemorates an important place.

Later Buddhist tradition also speaks of three main types of “relics” or “memorials” of the Buddha:

1. Bodily relics – physical remains such as bone, hair, or tooth.

2. Relic of use – things used by the Buddha, such as his robe or begging bowl.

3. Dhamma relics – the teachings, which are like a living presence of the Buddha in the world.

Our internal texts do not always list these three in one place, but we can see the same idea spread through them: the Buddha is remembered and honoured through his body, his possessions, and especially his Dhamma. Later, in the *Questions of King Milinda*, this idea becomes very clear.

2.3 The Division of the Relics in the Mahāparinibbāna Tradition

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya is the main canonical source for the final days of the Buddha and the story of his relics. Our file *SuttaPitaka210710.pdf* contains an introduction to this sutta. The editor explains that when the Buddha passed away, there was a dispute over his remains. The city leaders agreed to divide the relics among themselves, and each group built a monument or stupa over their share.

This picture is confirmed by the introduction to *The Questions of King Milinda*. When the author speaks about the Greek king Menander (Milinda), he compares the division of Menander's remains by his followers to "the division of the Buddha's remains recorded in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta: the city leaders agreed to divide the relics among themselves, each to erect a monument in his honour." Here we see that:

- The dividing of relics and the building of stupas was already a famous story in the early Buddhist tradition.

- It was used as a model for later practices, even in non-Indian contexts.

This narrative shows several important things:

1. The relics of the Buddha were seen as extremely precious, so different communities wanted a share.

2. There was a need for fair distribution, to avoid conflict over ownership.

3. The natural result of receiving relics was to build a stupa or shrine, as a place for honour and remembrance.

From a peace studies view, we can already notice a tension: on one side, relics unite people in devotion; on the other side, they can become objects of competition. How this tension is handled becomes important for social harmony. We will return to this in later chapters.

2.4 Relics in the *Questions of King Milinda*

The *Questions of King Milinda* (Milindapañhā) is a dialogue between King Milinda and the monk Nāgasena. It is not part of the four main

Nikāyas, but it is an important classical text in the Theravāda tradition. It explains many Buddhist ideas through simple stories and similes.

In the introduction, the editor describes the historical king Menander and explains that his followers shared his body and built monuments, similar to the way the Buddha's relics were divided and enshrined. This already shows that the text takes relics very seriously, and that it sees them as a natural object of honour after the death of a great person.

Later in the text, there is a key passage where King Milinda asks about the "general shop" of the Buddha. Nāgasena answers that the general shop of the Blessed One is:

> "The nine-limbed Word of the Buddha, the shrines of his bodily relics and the things he used, and the jewel of the Order."

This short sentence is very rich. It brings together three important objects of faith:

1. The Word of the Buddha – the teachings in nine categories (such as suttas, verses, discourses, etc.).

2. Shrines of bodily relics and used objects – stupas, reliquaries, and special items associated with the Buddha.

3. The Order (Saṅgha) – the community of monks and nuns.

They are all described as one "general shop" or "great store" where people can come to "buy" what they need spiritually. Of course, they do not buy with money, but with faith, effort, and practice. In simple words, Nāgasena is saying:

> "If you want to grow in the Dhamma, you go to the teachings, to the relic shrines, and to the living Saṅgha."

This tells us several things about relics:

- They are not separate from the Dhamma and the Saṅgha; they belong together.
- They are means to enter the path, not the final goal.
- They are part of the "shop" of spiritual goods that the Buddha offers to the world.

2.5 Relic Shrines as Foundations for Merit and Liberation

In the Milinda text, there is also a well-known simile where Nāgasena explains why building a shrine for the Buddha's relics is useful, even though the Buddha has already passed into final Nibbāna. The king asks: if the Buddha is gone, what is the point of building shrines? Is there still any benefit?

Nāgasena answers with a simile of the earth and crops (I summarise it in simple English):

- Imagine a farmer who wants to grow grain. He needs earth as a foundation. Without earth, there is nowhere for the seeds to grow.
- In the same way, the relic shrines are like the earth; they give a firm basis for good deeds, devotion, and meditation.

Thanks to relic shrines:

- People are inspired to give offerings, listen to Dhamma, and practice meditation.

- Humans and devas can gather, pay respect, and create wholesome kamma.

- These wholesome actions become conditions for progress on the path and, finally, for liberation.

In this way, Nāgasena defends relic worship against the criticism that it is useless or "only for the body". He shows that the real function of a relic shrine is to support good mental states and wholesome actions in those who visit it.

We can put this into peace studies language:

- Relic shrines create spaces where people are encouraged to act with generosity, respect, and mindfulness.

- This reduces the influence of greed, hatred, and delusion, which are roots of conflict.

- By strengthening positive qualities, the shrines become small training grounds for peace, both inner and outer.

2.6 Relics as Memory and Living Presence

From these sources we can see that relics are not just bones or teeth. They are centres of memory and signs of presence.

1. Memory of the Buddha's life.
   The Mahāparinibbāna tradition tells the story of the Buddha's passing and the building of stupas. Every time people hear or retell this story, they remember the Buddha's compassion, wisdom, and final instructions. A stupa or relic shrine becomes a visual story of these events.

2. Sign of the Buddha's presence.
   Even though the Buddha has passed away, the relics are treated as symbols of his continuing influence. When people bow down to a stupa or tooth relic, they feel as if they are bowing to the Buddha himself. The Milinda text supports this feeling by placing relic shrines inside the "general shop" of the Buddha, together with his living Word and the Saṅgha.

3. Bridge between generations.
   Relics allow later generations to feel connected to the early community. A person living many centuries after the Buddha can still say: "Here is a physical trace of him. Many previous generations have also come here, bowed, and practised." This creates a sense of continuity, which is very important for cultural heritage and community identity.

From a peace perspective, shared memory and shared symbols can unite people. When communities meet around a relic shrine and tell the same stories, they create a common narrative. This common narrative can reduce suspicion and increase trust among different groups of Buddhists.

2.7 Relic Shrines as Meeting Places of Humans and Devas

In many Pāli texts, we see that not only humans, but also devas (gods or heavenly beings) honour the Buddha and the Dhamma. The Milinda similes about relic shrines clearly mention that both devas and humans benefit from them. A relic shrine is a meeting point between:

- The human world (people who come, offer flowers, light lamps, listen to teachings).

- The divine world (devas who rejoice in the merit, or who are said to visit and protect the shrine).

Even if a modern reader does not literally believe in devas, we can still read this symbolically:

- Devas can represent subtle or refined states of mind.
- A relic shrine becomes a place where coarse states (anger, greed) are left behind, and refined states (joy, faith, calm) are encouraged.

In both cases, the message is similar:

> A relic shrine is a place where the atmosphere is lifted up, where people try to behave in a noble way, and where unseen forces (whether psychological or spiritual) are aligned with goodness.

This view supports the idea of relic shrines as spaces that can support peace and harmony. If a shrine is used correctly, people will:

- Control their behaviour, speech, and clothing.
- Show respect to others.
- Avoid quarrels in that place.

This habit can then spread out from the shrine into wider social life.

2.8 Relics, Faith and Wisdom

It is possible to look at relic worship only from the outside and think: “This is just emotion. People bow to bones and expect magic.” But the internal sources show a more balanced picture.

On one side, relics are clearly linked with faith (saddhā):

- People feel devotion and tenderness when they see or imagine the Buddha’s relics.
- They want to express gratitude and honour by offering flowers, incense, and lights.
- This strong emotion can support confidence in the path.

On the other side, the texts always connect relics back to wisdom and practice:

- In the Milinda simile, the purpose of relic shrines is to give a basis for good actions that support the path to Nibbāna.
- The same text puts relic shrines next to the Word of the Buddha and the Saṅgha as different parts of one “shop”. This makes it clear that relics are not enough by themselves; they are helpful when they lead to learning, reflection, and practice.

A later practical handbook on dependent origination, written by a teacher who founded a Buddha Tooth Relics Preservation Museum, uses the same pattern. In the preface, the author tells how his life of study and meditation led him to establish the museum, and how the Dhamma of dependent origination is at the centre of his work. The relics are important, but they are always connected with:

- Teaching Abhidhamma and Pāli scriptures.
- Training people in meditation.
- Helping them understand the chain of causes that leads to suffering and its end.

In this way, the modern tooth relic museum continues the older pattern:

> Relics → Faith → Study and Practice → Wisdom → Inner peace and social benefit.

When we look at relics from this angle, they are not competitors to wisdom, but doorways to it. The real danger is not relics themselves, but wrong understanding of relics. This point will be important later when we study the risks of conflict and misuse.

2.9 Relics and Cultural Heritage

So far, we have spoken in religious language: faith, merit, devas, Nibbāna, and so on. However, in modern times, relic shrines and stupas are also seen as part of cultural heritage. Our internal sources already give material for this view, even though they are older.

1. Relics and social memory.
   The story of the division of the relics in the Mahāparinibbāna tradition, and the later comment about Menander's remains in the Milinda introduction, show that sharing relics and building monuments is a social process. It creates physical landmarks and shared stories. These become heritage objects – things that carry identity and memory for a group.

2. Relics and community identity.
   When each city or community receives a part of the relics and

builds a stupa, it can say: “We also have a direct connection to the Buddha.” This is a strong basis for local pride and religious identity. At the same time, since all the relics come from the same Buddha, there is a sense of unity across different places. Many stupas, but one teacher.

3. Relics and education.
   The Milinda text’s idea of the “general shop” suggests that relic shrines are places where people learn the Dhamma and meet the Saṅgha. In modern times, the Buddha tooth relic museum in our internal handbook does the same through classes, meditation courses, and talks. This is a clear example of how relic institutions can act as cultural and educational centres.

4. Relics and architecture / art.
   While our texts do not go into detail about art history, we know that stupas and relic shrines often inspired sculpture, paintings, and special forms of architecture. Even without external sources, we can logically see that a community that builds and decorates a stupa is building a shared artistic project. This strengthens social bonds and gives a visible shape to invisible values.

For peace studies, heritage can be both a bridge and a barrier. It is a bridge when communities share, protect, and celebrate their heritage in an open and respectful way. It is a barrier when groups use heritage to exclude others or to claim superiority. Our texts show both sides: the dividing of relics can be done fairly, but it can also lead to quarrels. This will be an important theme when we talk about the role of custodians.

2.10 Summary and Link to the Next Chapter

In this chapter, we have looked at Buddha's sacred relics mainly through the lens of canonical and classical texts, especially the Mahāparinibbāna tradition and the *Questions of King Milinda*, together with hints from a modern handbook connected to a tooth relic museum. We have seen that:

- Relics are divided and enshrined so that many communities can share in the Buddha's presence.
- Relic shrines are part of the "general shop" of the Buddha, along with his teachings and the Saṅgha.
- They provide a foundation for merit, devotion, and practice that can lead to liberation.
- They function as centres of memory, symbols of presence, and meeting places for humans and devas.
- When connected with teaching and practice, relics can support wisdom and peace, not oppose them.
- They are important elements of cultural heritage, creating identity and continuity across generations.

From a peace studies angle, we can say that relics and their shrines are potential tools for positive peace. They can help shape gentle, generous, and respectful behaviour. However, because they are powerful symbols, they can also become objects of rivalry and conflict if they are not handled wisely.

Chapter 3 Custodians of Relics as Guardians of the Sāsana

3.1 Purpose of this Chapter

In Chapter 2 we focused on Buddha's sacred relics themselves. We saw that the relics are divided and enshrined, and that relic shrines support faith, merit, and practice. We also saw that relics are part of cultural heritage and shared memory.

In this chapter we move from the *relics* to the *people and institutions* who care for them. These are the custodians of Buddha's sacred relics. Here we ask:

1. Who are the traditional and modern custodians of relics?
2. How is their work connected to the sāsana – the Buddha's teaching and practice?
3. In what ways do custodians protect not only objects, but also faith, ethics, and social harmony?
4. What challenges do they face today?

The aim of this chapter is to show that relic custodians are not only "guards of a box". They are also guardians of the sāsana, and their decisions can help or harm peace in the community.

3.2 The Meaning of *Sāsana* and Continuity

The Pāli word sāsana can be translated as "dispensation", "teaching", or "message". It does not mean only written doctrine. It includes:

- The teachings of the Buddha (Dhamma).
- The discipline of the Saṅgha (Vinaya).
- The living practice of monks, nuns, and lay people.

Some teachers in the Theravāda tradition describe the sāsana in three aspects:

1. Pariyatti – study and learning of the teachings.
2. Paṭipatti – practice of the teachings (morality, meditation, wisdom).
3. Paṭivedha – realisation of the truth, direct experience of Nibbāna.

When Buddhists speak about "protecting the sāsana", they usually mean keeping all three aspects alive. Books alone are not enough. There must also be people who practice, and people who realise the Dhamma.

Relics belong to this big picture in two ways:

- They support faith and direct people towards study and practice.
- They act as symbols of the Buddha's presence, which reminds people to live according to Dhamma and Vinaya.

Therefore, those who take care of relics also take care of the conditions that keep the sāsana strong: faith, respect, discipline, and teaching.

3.3 Traditional Custodians: Saṅgha, Rulers, and Lay Supporters

In early Buddhist history, several groups share responsibility for sacred objects and sacred places.

1. The Saṅgha (monks and nuns)

The Saṅgha is the main "owner" and caretaker of religious property. Vinaya rules show that:

- When a monk dies, his robes and requisites usually go to the Saṅgha of the four directions, not to one person. This means that property is held in common.

- Senior monks have a duty to organise and distribute these things in a fair way, often giving some share to those who nursed the sick or helped the deceased.

This shows an important principle: sacred property is not private; it belongs to the Saṅgha as a whole. Monks act as trustees, not as personal owners. We can apply this idea to relics: relics also should not be treated as private objects, but as a trust from the Buddha to the whole community.

2. Kings and political leaders

In early Buddhist stories, we often see kings building stupas and monasteries, and taking responsibility for their safety. They may:

- Provide land and money to build or repair sacred places.

- Send soldiers to protect pilgrims on dangerous roads.

- Make laws to prevent theft or damage to monasteries and shrines.

In these cases, rulers become worldly custodians. They do not manage the Dhamma directly, but they create a safe material environment so that the sāsana can flourish.

3. Lay donors and committees

Lay people support relic shrines in many ways:

- Donating money or land.
- Joining temple or shrine committees.
- Organising festivals and ceremonies.

In many Buddhist countries today, temple committees made of local lay people work together with monastics. In this way, custodianship becomes a shared responsibility. Monks bring knowledge of Dhamma and Vinaya; lay people bring social connections, skills, and financial management.

When we think about modern relic custodians, we should remember this traditional pattern:

> Saṅgha, rulers, and lay supporters all have a role in protecting sacred places.

3.4 Vinaya and the Ethics of Custodianship

The Vinaya is not a manual about relics, but many of its rules are directly relevant for how custodians should behave.

1. Reasons for rules and public trust

As we saw in Chapter 1, the Buddha gave ten main reasons for making rules. Among them are:

- The excellence and comfort of the Order.
- The restraint of bad behaviour.
- The benefit of non-believers and the increase of believers.
- The maintenance of the true Dhamma and discipline.

These reasons show that every rule has social effects. The behaviour of monks and nuns must not cause fear, anger, or loss of faith in the wider public. For relic custodians, this means:

- They must avoid actions that could make people doubt their honesty.
- They must be transparent when handling donations and relic-related income.
- They must act in ways that increase respect for the Dhamma, not in ways that cause scandal.

2. Property held in trust

Vinaya stories show that when monks misuse the property of the Saṅgha, there are consequences. For example:

- Selling or pawning sacred objects is clearly not allowed.
- Using communal goods for private luxury is wrong.

From this, we can draw a principle:

> Custodianship means use without selfishness.

Relic custodians must think: “This does not belong to me. It belongs to the Buddha’s dispensation and to present and future generations.”

3. Protection of the Saṅgha’s reputation

The Vinaya also forbids monks from behaviour that looks bad in the eyes of lay people, such as:

- Joining sham battles and fighting games.
- Taking part in activities that are normally for thieves or criminals.

The reason is simple: if people see monks behave like this, they will lose respect and may reject the Dhamma.

Modern relic custodians must also care about reputation. If they are involved in corruption, politics, or quarrels, they damage not only their own name, but also the image of the shrine and of Buddhism more widely. In peace studies language, they weaken social trust, which is a key part of positive peace.

3.5 Modern Custodians: Relic Museums and Centres

In our internal materials, there is a modern handbook linked to a Buddha Tooth Relics Preservation Museum. This handbook shows a new kind of institution:

- It preserves a Buddha tooth relic.
- It offers classes on Abhidhamma and dependent origination.

- It trains people in meditation and the three aspects of the sāsana (pariyatti, paṭipatti, paṭivedha).

This museum is a good example of modern custodianship. It combines:

- Conservation work – keeping the relic safe from physical harm.
- Educational work – teaching the Dhamma to visitors and students.
- Spiritual work – supporting practice and realisation.

Such a museum usually has:

- A group of monks or teachers who design the teachings.
- A management office (in this case, called something like “Office of the Relic Preservation”) that handles administration.
- Lay volunteers who help with events, cleaning, and guiding visitors.

Here we see clearly that relic custodianship today is team work. It demands spiritual knowledge, organisational skills, and also an understanding of modern fields like heritage management, museum studies, and interfaith relations.

3.6 Material and Intangible Heritage

Custodians must protect two kinds of heritage:

1. Material heritage

This is the physical relic, the reliquary, the stupa, the shrine building, and all related objects. Duties here include:

- Proper storage and display conditions (temperature, humidity, security).
- Protection against theft, vandalism, or war.
- Maintenance of buildings (roofs, walls, access paths).
- Careful cleaning and repair, using materials that do not damage the object.

2. Intangible heritage

This is everything that cannot be touched but lives in the minds and hearts of people. It includes:

- The stories and legends linked to the relic.
- Chanting, rituals, and festivals around the shrine.
- Traditional ways of offering flowers, incense, or lamps.
- The ethical teachings that are repeated at the shrine, for example, taking the five precepts before a ceremony.
- Local customs that make the shrine part of community life.

If custodians focus only on the physical object and forget the intangible heritage, the shrine may become “dead” – like a museum object with no life. If they protect only rituals and stories but neglect the physical relic and building, everything can be lost through damage or decay.

Good custodians balance both sides. They know that:

> A relic is most powerful when material and intangible heritage come together to support faith and practice.

3.7 Custodians and Faith Communities

Relic sites are usually surrounded by faith communities: local residents, frequent pilgrims, occasional visitors, and monastic communities. The custodians stand in the middle, between:

- The relic and shrine,
- The Saṅgha,
- The lay followers,
- And sometimes also the state and tourists.

Their relationship with faith communities has several important duties.

1. Providing access

Custodians must decide:

- When the shrine is open.
- Who may come close to the relic.

- What kind of dress and behaviour is required.

If the rules are too strict, ordinary people may feel pushed away. If the rules are too loose, the atmosphere of respect disappears. Good custodians create clear and kind guidelines that help people behave properly without feeling afraid.

2. Listening and communication

Faith communities have needs and worries:

- They may want more teaching.
- They may have questions about the history of the relic.
- They may feel unhappy if they think decisions are unfair.

Custodians should have channels for listening: meetings, suggestion boxes, or open talks. When people feel heard, they are more ready to support decisions, even difficult ones.

3. Inclusive management

In many places, different ethnic or social groups visit the same relic shrine. If one group dominates all decisions, others may feel excluded. To support peace, custodians can:

- Include representatives from different groups in advisory committees.
- Use multiple languages in signs and teachings when possible.
- Organise events that welcome all, not only one subgroup.

In this way, the shrine becomes a shared space rather than a symbol of one group's power.

3.8 Ethical Responsibilities of Custodians

Because relics are powerful symbols, people often trust their custodians very much. This trust brings ethical responsibilities.

1. Personal integrity

Custodians should:

- Keep at least the five precepts (for lay people) or full monastic discipline (for monks and nuns).
- Avoid intoxication, which can lead to carelessness, quarrels, and scandal.
- Be honest in speech, especially about miracles, visions, or benefits connected to the relic. Exaggeration for profit is dangerous.

2. Financial transparency

Relic shrines often receive large donations. If money is misused:

- The reputation of the shrine is damaged.
- Donors feel betrayed.
- Conflicts can arise inside the management group.

To prevent this, custodians can:

- Keep clear records.

- Use independent audits.
- Report openly to the community about income and spending.

3. Avoiding manipulation

Sometimes people use sacred symbols to:

- Gain political support.
- Attack other religions or Buddhist groups.
- Justify violence or discrimination.

Custodians have a duty to refuse such manipulation. They should not allow the relic to become a "tool" in political campaigns or hateful speech. Instead, they can repeatedly teach that the Buddha's relics stand for compassion, wisdom, and non-violence.

3.9 Custodianship and Peacebuilding

From our peace studies perspective, we can now see that relic custodians can play a real part in peacebuilding, both inside the Buddhist community and in wider society.

1. Preventing and healing conflicts

Disputes can appear over:

- Who has the right to manage the shrine.
- How donations are used.
- Which rituals are "correct".

- Whose lineage or teacher is honoured.

These disputes can easily grow into schism and division, which, as we saw in Chapter 1, are strongly condemned in Buddhist texts.

Custodians can act as mediators by:

- Encouraging calm dialogue.
- Seeking advice from respected elders.
- Accepting majority decisions when appropriate.
- Putting the unity of the Saṅgha above personal pride.

2. Creating a culture of non-violence

Relic shrines can be used to promote:

- The five precepts as a basic "culture of non-violence".
- Teachings on loving-kindness (mettā) and compassion (karuṇā).
- Activities such as blood donation, support for the poor, or interfaith friendship projects.

When custodians organise such programmes, they help people to *live* the Dhamma, not just listen to it. This builds positive peace, where relationships are based on care and justice.

3. Interfaith and intercultural dialogue

Relic sites sometimes attract visitors from other religions or countries. If the custodians are open and friendly:

- They can explain the meaning of the relic and shrine in simple, respectful language.
- They can point to shared values like kindness, honesty, and respect for life.
- They can avoid language that criticises other faiths.

In this way, the relic shrine becomes a place of learning and dialogue, not of competition.

3.10 Challenges for Custodians Today

Modern relic custodians face many challenges:

1. Tourism and commercialisation

Large relic shrines often become tourist sites. This can bring money but also problems:

- Shops and loud behaviour may disturb the sacred atmosphere.
- Prices for offerings or services may become unfair.
- The place can start to feel like a business, not a holy site.

Custodians must balance economic needs and spiritual values. They can create quiet zones, control commercial activity, and keep some times of day just for prayer and meditation.

2. Politics and nationalism

In some countries, relics and temples are linked to national identity. While healthy pride in culture can be good, there is also a danger:

- Relics can be used as symbols against minority groups.
- Political leaders may appear at the shrine mainly for votes, not for true respect.

Custodians must be wise and careful. They should welcome all peaceful visitors but avoid supporting policies or actions that go against Buddhist ethics of non-violence and compassion.

3. Sectarianism inside Buddhism

Different Buddhist traditions may have different rituals and teachings. Sometimes they disagree about:

- How to honour relics.
- Which lineage is “authentic”.

If custodians support one group in a harsh way and reject others, conflict can grow. A better way is to focus on shared roots: the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the basic precepts, and respect for the Buddha.

4. Modern scepticism

Some modern people doubt the authenticity of relics. They may ask:

- “How can we know this bone or tooth really belongs to the Buddha?”
- “Isn’t this just superstition?”

Custodians should not become angry or afraid of such questions. Instead, they can answer calmly:

- Explain historical traditions and evidence, but also admit what is uncertain.

- Emphasise that the *most important relic* is the Dhamma and the practice that leads to peace.

- Invite people to see the relic as a symbol that can inspire good qualities, whether or not they are sure about the physical history.

In this way, they keep honesty and do not depend on blind belief.

3.11 Summary and Link to the Next Chapter

In this chapter we have seen that:

- Custodians of Buddha's sacred relics come from the Saṅgha, the lay community, and sometimes from state institutions.

- Their role is closely connected to the sāsana understood as study, practice, and realisation.

- Vinaya principles show that sacred property is held in trust, not owned, and that rules aim to protect both inner discipline and public trust.

- Modern custodians, such as relic museums, must care for both material and intangible heritage.

- They have ethical duties in access, communication, financial honesty, and resistance to political or commercial misuse.

- When they act with wisdom and compassion, custodians can become real peacebuilders in their communities. When they fail, relics can become sources of rivalry and conflict.

Chapter 4 Relics, Cultural Heritage, and Faith Communities

4.1 Purpose of this Chapter

In Chapter 2 we studied the meaning of Buddha's relics in the texts. We saw that relics are not just bones or teeth. They support faith, merit, and practice. In Chapter 3 we looked at the custodians who care for relics and how they help to protect the Buddha's dispensation (*sāsana*).

In this chapter, we put these ideas together and look at relics as cultural heritage. We will ask:

1. How do relics and stupas act as heritage objects in Buddhist communities?

2. How do rituals and festivals around relics bring faith communities together?

3. How do teaching and education around relic sites keep Buddhist culture alive?

4. In what ways can relics and their customs support social harmony, and in what ways can they become a cause of tension?

The aim of this chapter is to show that Buddha's relics are part of a living heritage system. They connect past and present, material objects and inner values, local identity and universal teachings.

4.2 What is Cultural Heritage? (In Simple Terms)

Before we look at Buddhist relics, it is helpful to explain "cultural heritage" in simple language.

We can divide it into two main parts:

1. Tangible (material) heritage
    - Things we can touch and see, such as buildings, statues, books, paintings, robes, relics, and stupas.
2. Intangible heritage
    - Things we cannot touch, such as stories, songs, rituals, languages, values, and traditional knowledge.

For example, a stupa with a relic inside is material heritage. The chanting of verses, the way people bow, the story of how the relic came there, and the festival held every year are intangible heritage.

Both are important. If we keep only the object but forget the stories, the heritage becomes "dead". If we keep only the stories without the object, the tradition may slowly weaken and disappear. Heritage is strongest when object and meaning stay together.

In the case of Buddha's relics:

- The relic and reliquary are tangible heritage.
- The teachings about the Buddha, the rituals of honour, the festivals, and the ethical lessons are intangible heritage.

Relic custodians must care for both sides if they want to keep the sāsana healthy and to support peace in society.

4.3 Relics as Anchors of Collective Memory

A key function of heritage is to support collective memory. Collective memory means the way a group remembers its past and understands who it is.

Buddhist relics do this in several ways:

1. Relics as reminders of the Buddha's life

When believers see or imagine a relic, they remember key scenes from the Buddha's life: his awakening, his teaching, his compassion, and his passing away. The story of the division of the relics after his final nirvāṇa is also an important part of this memory. Every stupa or shrine that claims to hold relics says, in effect:

> "Here, in this place, we remember the Buddha and his qualities."

Because of this, relic shrines are often included in pilgrimage routes. Pilgrims may visit several places that are linked by stories of the Buddha. The physical movement of pilgrims from one shrine to another helps to keep the stories alive in their minds.

2. Relics and local history

Many towns and villages tell their own story through a relic. For example, they may say:

- "Our city received these relics a thousand years ago from a famous king."
- "We built this stupa after a great event or miracle."

In this way, the history of the local community is tied to the history of the Buddha's dispensation. The relic is like a "knot" that ties world history and local history together.

3. Relics and inter-generational connection

Old people take children and grandchildren to relic shrines and tell them stories. These stories may include:

- The life of the Buddha.
- The building of the shrine.
- The sacrifices of past donors.

By doing this, older generations pass on not only information, but also emotion – respect, gratitude, and a sense of belonging. The child may think:

> "I am part of this long story. My grandparents came here. Their parents came here. I also will bring my children here."

This is exactly what cultural heritage tries to protect: a living chain of memory and identity.

4.4 Relics and the Identity of Faith Communities

Relic shrines also play a strong role in forming community identity. Identity means how a group sees itself and how it is seen by others.

We can see this at different levels:

1. Local community identity

Relic shrines can become the “heart” of a village or city. People may say:

- “This is our town temple.”
- “This stupa protects us.”

Festivals, markets, and meetings are often organised around the shrine. Even people who are not very religious may feel proud of “their” stupa or temple and defend it if someone insults or threatens it. The shrine becomes a symbol of unity for the area.

2. Ethnic or cultural identity

In some countries, certain relics are closely linked to a particular ethnic group or culture. People may think:

- “This tooth relic belongs to our people.”
- “This stupa shows the greatness of our ancestors.”

In a positive way, this can give a sense of dignity and a wish to keep traditional arts and values alive. It may inspire people to study their language, songs, and customs more deeply.

But there is also a risk: when a relic is seen as "belonging" only to one group, it may be used to exclude others or to fuel nationalism. We will discuss these dangers later in the chapter.

3. Pan-Buddhist identity

Some relics are important for Buddhists from many countries. Pilgrims come from different cultures and schools of Buddhism, but all respect the relic. In these cases:

- The relic functions as a symbol of shared Buddhist identity across national borders.

- People may feel "we are one family of disciples of the Buddha," even if they follow different traditions at home.

This kind of identity is very helpful for global peace within Buddhism. It helps to reduce sectarian attitudes and creates a sense of common purpose.

4.5 Rituals around Relics: Intangible Heritage in Action

Around almost every relic shrine, we find repeated rituals and ceremonies. These are an important part of intangible heritage.

Common examples include:

- Circumambulation – walking three times clockwise around the stupa or shrine, often with folded hands.

- Offering flowers, incense, and lights – as signs of respect and impermanence.

- Chanting – reciting verses in Pāli or the local language that praise the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha.

- Taking the five precepts – before big ceremonies, lay people repeat the basic moral training.

- Meditation – some sit and silently develop mindfulness or loving-kindness.

These rituals have several functions:

1. Training the body and speech

Through repeated practice, people learn:

- How to move with calm and respect.

- How to speak in gentle and polite ways in the sacred area.

This physical and verbal discipline shapes character. People who are used to bowing and speaking softly in front of the relic may also become more modest and careful in daily life.

2. Training the mind

Ritual alone is not enough, but it can support mindfulness and wise reflection. During offerings and chanting, people may think:

- "The Buddha was pure and wise. I want to follow his example."

- "These flowers will soon fade. My life is also short. I should not waste it."

In this way, outer actions support inner understanding.

3. Creating shared emotion

When many people chant together or walk around the stupa with candles at night, there is a strong sense of togetherness. People feel:

- “We are many, but our hearts are united in devotion.”

This shared emotion can help to reduce personal loneliness and social divisions. It reminds people that they are part of something larger than themselves.

4.6 Festivals and Social Harmony

In addition to daily rituals, many relic shrines have annual festivals. These festivals are moments where religious practice meets social life.

Typical features include:

- Processions of the relic or relic casket.
- Special chanting ceremonies, sometimes lasting all night.
- Offerings of colourful flags, lanterns, or umbrellas.
- Charity activities, such as giving food to the poor or to all visitors.
- Markets, food stalls, music, and traditional dances.

From a peace studies view, such festivals can support social harmony in several ways:

1. Building social bonds

During festivals:

- Neighbours work together to decorate the streets.
- Youth groups practise performances.
- Families gather, often wearing traditional clothes.

These activities build trust and cooperation. People get to know each other better, which reduces fear and prejudice.

2. Sharing joy across social lines

At a big festival, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, old and young may all come together. For a time, normal social barriers are softer. They stand side by side in front of the same relic, chant the same verses, and share the same food.

This is a small example of equality and shared dignity, which is an element of positive peace.

3. Supporting ethical messages

Often, sermons during festivals focus on:

- The five precepts.
- Generosity, loving-kindness, and compassion.
- The dangers of anger, jealousy, and addiction.

Because people are already emotionally open during festivals, these messages can enter the heart more deeply than in a normal lecture.

Of course, festivals also bring risks, such as noise, rubbish, or alcohol use. Wise custodians try to manage these risks so that the festival remains a force for harmony, not disorder.

4.7 Teaching and Education at Relic Sites

Modern relic centres, such as tooth relic museums and large temples, often include teaching programmes. These programmes are an important part of cultural heritage because they transmit knowledge and values to the next generation.

Common activities include:

- Dhamma classes for children and adults.
- Study of Pāli and Buddhist texts.
- Meditation retreats and workshops.
- Talks on topics like dependent origination, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path.

In some cases, the relic itself is used as a starting point for teaching. For example, a teacher may say:

- “This tooth relic reminds us that the Buddha had a human body, subject to aging and death. That is why he taught about impermanence and suffering.”
- Then the teacher explains the truths of aging, illness, and death in more detail.

In this way:

- The object leads to reflection.
- Reflection leads to practice.
- Practice leads to inner peace and more ethical behaviour in daily life.

Education at relic sites can also include themes of peace and non-violence. Teachers may connect:

- The Buddha's compassion with modern ideas of human rights and social justice.
- The five precepts with modern problems like drug use, domestic violence, and corruption.

When this is done skilfully, relic shrines become schools of peace, not just places of emotion.

4.8 Relics, Space, and Daily Life

Relic shrines do not stand outside daily life. They influence the space and rhythm of the community around them.

1. Sacred geography

In many cities, the central temple or stupa gives structure to the town. Streets may lead towards it. Parks and markets may grow around it. People may use it as a meeting point.

This shapes how people move and where they gather. It creates a sacred geography, where everyday paths cross sacred space. This daily contact with the shrine can:

- Remind people to keep precepts.
- Encourage them to drop by for a few minutes of prayer or meditation.
- Make them feel that “the Buddha watches over our community.”

2. Time and rhythm

Daily and weekly rituals, as well as yearly festivals, give a rhythm to community life. People count time by:

- “Before the relic festival…”
- “After the full moon ceremony…”

This rhythm connects religious practice with agricultural or school calendars. In this way, heritage structures time as well as space.

3. Everyday ethics

Because the shrine is near, people may think twice before doing unwholesome actions in that area. For example:

- They may avoid shouting or fighting near the temple.
- They may feel shame if they walk past the shrine drunk or in inappropriate clothing.

This is not perfect, of course, but it shows how sacred heritage can gently support social order.

4.9 Relics, Inclusion, and Exclusion

Up to now, we have mostly shown positive sides. But heritage can also create boundaries. Sometimes relics are used in ways that exclude or divide.

Some possible problems include:

1. “Our relic” vs “their relic”

Different groups may claim special rights over a relic. They may say:

- “Only people from our ethnic group or sect can go near the relic.”
- “Our ritual style is correct. Others are wrong or impure.”

If this attitude is strong, relics can become markers of division instead of bridges. People may feel fear or anger when “outsiders” appear.

2. Nationalism and political use

Political leaders may try to use relics to strengthen their position. They may appear at ceremonies with cameras, make speeches in front of the shrine, or claim that they are the “true protectors” of the Buddhist heritage.

This can be dangerous if:

- Political messages become mixed with hate speech against minorities.
- State power is used to favour one religious group over others.

In such cases, the relic, which should symbolise compassion and wisdom, becomes a tool of power.

3. Commercial pressures

Sometimes, relic shrines become strongly commercialised. Tourists may come mainly for photos, not for respect. Shops and hotels may push religious messages into the background. This can make:

- Poor locals feel that the shrine is now “for tourists”, not for them.
- Serious practitioners feel disappointed or pushed aside.

If not controlled, commercialisation can damage the spiritual meaning of the relic and weaken the community’s connection to it.

4.10 Roles of Custodians in Managing Heritage and Harmony

Because of these challenges, the role of custodians is very important. They stand at the centre of many tensions: between old and new, sacred and commercial, local identity and universal values.

Some key responsibilities are:

1. Protecting access and dignity

Custodians need to:

- Keep the shrine open in fair ways to local people, pilgrims, and respectful visitors.
- Set clear rules that protect the dignity of the site (no loud music, proper dress, no alcohol, etc.).

This allows the shrine to be welcoming but still sacred.

2. Encouraging inclusive identity

When possible, custodians can promote the idea that:

- The relic is a gift for all beings, not a weapon of separation.
- Different Buddhist groups can share the space, even if they have small differences in practice.
- People of other religions can visit as friends and learners.

They can show this attitude in their own speech and actions, and by including different voices in committees and planning.

3. Balancing economy and spirituality

Custodians must often handle money from donations, shops, and tourism. A healthy balance might include:

- Limiting commercial activity near the central shrine.
- Using income to support education, charity, and community projects.
- Reporting finances clearly to avoid suspicion.

When people see that money is used for good causes, trust grows, and social harmony is easier to maintain.

4. Teaching peace values clearly

Finally, custodians should speak openly about peace. They can:

- Link the meaning of the relic to non-violence, compassion, and wisdom.
- Condemn any use of the site for hatred or discrimination.
- Support events that promote dialogue between groups.

In this way, they turn the heritage site into a peace education centre, not just a tourist spot.

4.11 Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that Buddha's relics are much more than holy objects locked in a box. They are at the centre of a rich heritage system that includes:

- Material elements: relics, reliquaries, stupas, temples, and artworks.
- Intangible elements: stories, rituals, festivals, teachings, emotions, and values.

Relics help to create and maintain:

- Collective memory of the Buddha and of local history.
- Community identity at local, ethnic, and global Buddhist levels.
- Shared practices that shape body, speech, and mind.

- Sacred space and time that give structure to daily life and social rhythms.

At the same time, relics and their heritage can become sources of tension when they are used for exclusion, nationalism, or commercial gain. For this reason, the custodians of relics have a serious responsibility. They must protect both the physical objects and the deeper meaning of the heritage. When they act with wisdom and compassion, relic shrines can become strong centres of social harmony, ethical education, and peacebuilding.

Chapter 5 Relics, Ethics, and Social Harmony

5.1 Purpose of this Chapter

In the last chapter we looked at Buddha's relics as cultural heritage. We saw how they support collective memory, identity, and ritual life.

In this chapter we move closer to ethics. We ask:

1. How do Buddha's relics and their shrines influence people's moral behaviour?

2. How do basic Buddhist ethics, like the five precepts, connect with life around relic sites?

3. How can ethical practice at relic shrines support social harmony and peace in society?

4. What dangers appear when relics are linked to wrong views or unwholesome motives?

The main idea of this chapter is simple:

> Relics are not only holy objects; they are also moral teachers.
> The way people behave around relics can build or break social harmony.

5.2 Basic Buddhist Ethics: A Short Overview

To understand the ethics around relics, we first need a short reminder of basic Buddhist morality.

1. The five precepts for lay people

Lay Buddhists are usually encouraged to keep five basic precepts:

1. Not to kill living beings.
2. Not to steal.
3. Not to commit sexual misconduct.
4. Not to lie.
5. Not to use intoxicants that cause carelessness.

These precepts are not just rules to obey blindly. They are tools to protect:

- Ourselves (from regret, fear, and bad habits), and
- Others (from harm, exploitation, and suffering).

2. Roots of wholesome and unwholesome actions

Buddhist teaching explains that actions are driven by mental roots:

- Unwholesome roots: greed, hatred, and delusion.
- Wholesome roots: non-greed (generosity), non-hatred (kindness), and non-delusion (wisdom, clarity).

When greed, hatred, and delusion are strong, people harm each other. When generosity, kindness, and wisdom are strong, people help each other and live in peace.

3. Ethics and peace

From a peace studies point of view:

- The five precepts and wholesome roots support negative peace (less direct violence) and positive peace (more trust, fairness, and cooperation).
- They shape the way people relate to one another in families, workplaces, and communities.

Relic shrines are special places where these ethical teachings are often repeated and practised, so they can have a strong influence on social harmony.

5.3 Relic Shrines as Moral Classrooms

When people come to a relic shrine, they usually do not come just to look. They:

- Bow, offer flowers and lights.
- Take precepts.
- Listen to talks.
- Join group chanting.

All of this turns the shrine into a kind of moral classroom. But this classroom is not like a school with exams. It is more like a training ground for the heart.

Some key ways this works:

1. Sense of presence

Many visitors feel that in front of the relic, they are “face to face” with the Buddha. Even if they know the Buddha passed away long ago, they feel:

- “He sees me.”
- “I should behave well here.”

This feeling encourages:

- Honest speech.
- Respectful body language.

- Serious reflection on their actions.

2. Reminder of impermanence

Relics are physical remains. They remind people that even a fully enlightened Buddha had a body that aged and died. Flowers offered at the shrine also fade quickly. This gives a natural lesson:

> "Life is short. I should use it wisely and avoid harming others."

3. Encouragement of generosity

Relic shrines are common places for dāna (giving):

- Offering food to monastics.
- Supporting repairs and community projects.
- Giving free food or drinks to other pilgrims.

This repeated practice of giving weakens greed and strengthens sharing, which is good for social harmony.

5.4 Taking the Five Precepts at Relic Shrines

At many important shrines, especially during festivals or full-moon days, lay people take the five precepts together. A monk or nun leads the recitation, and the crowd repeats each line.

This collective act has several effects:

1. Public moral commitment

When people take precepts in a large group, it becomes a public promise. They are not only telling themselves "I will try to behave well," but also telling their neighbours, family, and community. This public aspect:

- Strengthens their sense of responsibility.
- Builds trust between people ("I know my friend also took the precepts").

2. Linking ethics with emotion and faith

Taking precepts in front of a relic, with incense, chanting, and a sense of sacred presence, connects ethics with positive emotions:

- Joy in doing something good.
- Feeling close to the Buddha.
- Feeling supported by the group.

This makes the precepts feel less like "rules" and more like a choice of the heart.

3. Repetition and habit

Precepts are often taken many times throughout a person's life. This repetition slowly creates habit. Even if someone fails sometimes, the regular renewal of intention keeps pulling them back towards ethical behaviour.

For social harmony, this repeated public commitment to non-violence, honesty, and self-control is very powerful. It quietly builds a culture where harmful actions are less acceptable.

5.5 Intoxicants, Disorder, and the Relic Environment

The fifth precept, about intoxicants, is especially important for social harmony. Many problems in society—arguments, accidents, domestic violence, crime—are linked to alcohol and drugs.

Around relic shrines, we often see:

- No-alcohol zones.
- Signs asking visitors not to come drunk.
- Teachings that explain how intoxication leads to carelessness, quarrels, and suffering.

When people hear these teachings again and again at a place they respect deeply, they may start to think more carefully about their own habits.

If a whole community takes the fifth precept seriously, the effects are visible:

- Fewer fights, especially at festivals and celebrations.
- Less fear in families, especially for children.
- More peaceful nights, less noise and disturbance.

Relic custodians can support this by:

- Refusing to allow alcohol sales in the immediate area of the shrine.
- Educating young people about the social costs of intoxication.
- Praising and supporting those who try to reduce or stop their drinking.

In this way, the presence of a relic shrine can slowly change drinking culture and improve social peace.

5.6 Mental Roots, Relics, and Social Harmony

The mental roots of actions—greed, hatred, and delusion, or their opposites—are not directly visible. But relic shrines can influence these deep layers of the mind.

1. Reducing greed (lobha)

At relic sites:

- People give offerings without expecting anything back.
- Rich and poor may stand side by side in the same line to offer flowers.

This helps to break strong ideas of “mine” and “yours” and opens the heart to sharing. When greed is weaker:

- Corruption and unfairness decrease.
- People are more willing to support common projects like schools, clinics, and charity.

2. Softening hatred (dosa)

Relic shrines are often used as places to practise mettā (loving-kindness). Some visitors silently wish:

- “May all beings be happy.
  May all be free from suffering.”

When this practice becomes a habit, it slowly weakens anger and resentment. People may:

- Forgive old hurts.
- Become more patient with family and neighbours.
- Avoid violent responses in conflicts.

3. Clearing delusion (moha)

Good teaching at relic sites helps people see:

- That actions have consequences (kamma).
- That anger and greed do not bring true happiness.

- That chasing status and praise is not the highest goal.

This wisdom reduces delusion and helps people make wiser choices. As more people in a community see clearly, it becomes easier to solve problems without violence.

5.7 Relic Sites as “Safe Spaces”

Relic shrines are often treated as safe spaces, where certain behaviours are not allowed:

- No fighting or shouting.
- No weapons.
- No begging in aggressive ways.
- No selling of harmful things.

This makes the shrine area feel secure for:

- Children and elderly people.
- Women and men who come alone.
- Visitors from other places.

These safe spaces have a wider effect:

- People learn that it is possible to create public areas where everyone feels protected.

- They may start to ask: “How can we bring this feeling of safety to our streets, schools, and markets?”

From a peace studies view, this is an example of how local peace practices around relics can inspire wider social change.

5.8 Concord, Schism, and Moral Examples

Early Buddhist texts strongly praise concord in the Saṅgha and condemn schism. A divided community is said to bring unhappiness to many beings. A harmonious community brings happiness and strengthens faith.

Relic custodians and communities give a public example:

- If they cooperate, share tasks, and speak kindly, pilgrims see a model of harmony.

- If they quarrel openly over money, power, or ritual styles, pilgrims see the opposite.

Because relic shrines are highly visible, behaviour there has a big impact. People may think:

- “If even the priests and leaders here cannot get along, why should we behave better?”

So, concord at relic sites is not just an internal matter. It is a social signal that can either support or weaken ethical behaviour in wider society.

5.9 Relic Practice and Everyday Ethics

The real test of ethics is not what happens in front of the shrine, but what happens after people go home. Still, practice at relic sites can strongly affect daily life.

Some examples:

- A person who regularly offers food at a shrine may also become more generous at home and work.
- Someone who renews the five precepts every month may slowly give up lying or harsh speech.
- A young person who joins relic festivals and hears teachings about kindness may be less likely to join violent gangs or bullying groups.

These changes are usually small and slow, but they add up over time. In this way, relic sites act like ethical batteries that keep charging people's good intentions.

5.10 Dangers: Superstition, Transactional Ethics, and Misuse

Ethics around relics are not always healthy. There are also dangers when understanding is weak.

1. Superstition without ethics

Some people may think:

- "If I just offer flowers to the relic, my problems will disappear," even if they continue to lie, cheat, or hurt others.

This attitude separates ritual from morality. It turns the shrine into a place of "magic" instead of a place of moral transformation. If this becomes common:

- People may ignore the five precepts.
- They may use relic worship as an excuse: "I can do wrong, but then I will offer to the relic and everything is fine."

2. Transactional thinking

Another danger is business-style thinking about merit:

- "I give this much money, so I must get this much good luck."

This can lead to:

- Competition in donations ("I donated more than you").
- Pressure on poor people to give money they cannot afford.
- Religious leaders focusing more on fundraising than on teaching.

Such attitudes come from greed and delusion, not from wisdom.

3. Using relics to justify harm

The worst misuse is when people try to use relics and Buddhism to justify:

- Hatred towards other groups.
- Support for violent actions or unfair laws.

This totally goes against the Buddha's message of non-harming and compassion. When this happens, relics, which should be symbols of peace, become symbols of division.

5.11 From Personal Ethics to Social Structures

So far, we have talked mostly about individual behaviour. But relic-based ethics can also influence social structures.

Positive possibilities include:

- Community projects: Donations at relic shrines can support schools, clinics, orphanages, and help for the poor. This brings more justice and support to vulnerable groups.

- Clean governance: If leaders who are relic custodians take the precepts seriously, they may avoid corruption, create fair rules, and treat all groups respectfully.

- Non-violent conflict resolution: Communities that regularly hear teachings on loving-kindness and patience may prefer dialogue and mediation over physical force when disputes appear.

In this way, the ethical energy around relics can move from the personal level ("I will not harm") to the structural level ("We will build fair and peaceful systems").

5.12 Conclusion

In this chapter we explored how Buddha's relics and their shrines are deeply connected with ethics and social harmony:

- Relic shrines work as moral classrooms where people take precepts, practise generosity, and reflect on impermanence.

- The five precepts, especially the one against intoxicants, support more peaceful families and communities.

- Practice at relic sites can weaken greed, hatred, and delusion, and strengthen generosity, kindness, and wisdom.

- Shrines can be safe spaces that model non-violence and respect.

- At the same time, there are dangers: superstition without ethics, transactional attitudes, and political misuse.

When relic custodians and communities keep the link between relic and right conduct strong, relic practice becomes a real force for positive peace. It shapes not only individual hearts, but also social relationships and structures.

Chapter 6 Risks: Conflict, Schism, and Misuse of the Sacred

6.1 Purpose of this Chapter

In the earlier chapters we focused on the positive side of Buddha's relics and their custodians. We saw that relics can support faith, cultural heritage, ethics, and social harmony.

However, peace studies teaches us that every powerful symbol has two sides. The same symbols that can unite people can also divide them. The same institutions that can protect harmony can also become centres of conflict.

In this chapter we look at the risks connected with relics and their custodians:

1. How can conflicts grow around sacred relics and shrines?

2. What does early Buddhism say about schism and wrong conduct in the Saṅgha?

3. How do ignorance, craving, and moral decline open the door to misuse of the sacred?

4. How can peace-oriented custodians prevent or heal such problems?

The goal is not to criticise relics or Buddhist communities, but to understand where dangers lie, so that custodians can work more clearly as agents of peace.

6.2 Why Relics Can Become Sources of Conflict

Relics are objects of strong emotion and deep respect. Because of this, they carry a kind of power. This power is not only spiritual; it is also social and, sometimes, political and economic.

Several factors make relics sensitive points:

1. High symbolic value

    - For many Buddhists, relics are the most sacred material objects connected to the Buddha.

    - To be “close” to a relic feels like being close to the Buddha himself.

    - Control over a relic or a relic shrine therefore gives a group strong symbolic status.

2. Economic value
    - Important relic shrines often attract many pilgrims and visitors.
    - This can bring donations, jobs, and business for shops and hotels.
    - Different groups may compete for a share of this income.
3. Identity value
    - Communities may link their identity to a particular relic: “This relic belongs to our city, our people, our lineage.”
    - When identity is weak or under pressure, people may cling more tightly to such symbols.

Because these three kinds of value are concentrated in one place, disagreements can become intense. Disputes about management, ritual style, or ownership can easily grow into larger conflicts.

From a peace studies perspective, relics are therefore conflict-prone objects. They require wise and careful custodianship.

6.3 Schism in the Saṅgha: A Serious Warning

Early Buddhist texts speak very strongly about schism (division) in the Saṅgha. Schism is described as one of the worst possible actions. It brings harm not only to the people directly involved, but also to many others.

Key points from these texts include:

- Schism in the Saṅgha is said to arise “for the unhappiness and loss of many beings,” both human and divine.
- It destroys faith in the Dhamma and Vinaya among lay followers.
- It has very serious karmic consequences for those who cause it.

By contrast, concord (harmony) in the Saṅgha is praised as something that brings welfare and happiness to many beings. It supports confidence in the Buddha’s teaching and helps the holy life to last long in the world.

Even though these passages originally refer to disputes about doctrine and discipline, the principle also applies to conflicts around relics:

- When monks, nuns, or lay leaders fight over relics and shrines, they risk creating divisions in the wider community.
- If the conflict becomes public, it can damage the reputation of Buddhism and discourage people from practice.

From this perspective, any dispute about relics that threatens to split a community should be treated as a serious danger, not a small matter.

6.4 Ignorance, Wrong View, and Misuse of the Sacred

Earlier chapters talked about the mental roots of unwholesome actions: greed, hatred, and delusion (ignorance). Buddhist analysis

also speaks about wrong view and moral confusion as conditions that lead to harmful behaviour.

These mental states play a big role in the misuse of relics.

1. Ignorance and superstition

When people do not understand the Dhamma deeply, they may think that relics work like magic objects:

- "If I just touch the reliquary, I will be safe from all problems."
- "If I pay for a special ceremony, I will be forgiven for any wrongdoing."

This wrong view separates ritual from ethics and wisdom. It may lead people to continue harmful actions while hoping that the relic will "clean" the results. In reality, Buddhist teaching makes it clear that:

- Actions have consequences (kamma).
- No ritual can erase the effects of unwholesome deeds if the person does not change their behaviour.

2. Craving for power and profit

When greed takes hold, relics can be used to gain:

- Political influence ("We are the defenders of the Buddha's relics, so you must trust us.")
- Economic profit (overcharging pilgrims, selling fake "blessed" objects, using donations for luxury).

Such behaviour turns sacred objects into tools for worldly success. It also creates injustice, as those with power may take more than their fair share, while ordinary believers make sacrifices.

3. Hatred and exclusion

When hatred and fear are strong, relics can be turned into symbols against others:

- "This relic shows that our group is pure and superior."
- "Those who do not honour this relic are enemies."

This attitude goes directly against the Buddha's teaching of non-violence and compassion for all beings. When relics are used to support discrimination or aggression, they are misused in a very serious way.

6.5 Moral Degeneration and the Role of Relic Sites

Some modern Dhamma manuals, based on early teachings, speak about moral degeneration in society. They say that:

- As time passes, people may become more careless about ethics.
- Intoxicants, greed for wealth, and enjoyment of violence can increase.
- Respect for the precepts and for spiritual teachers can decline.

From this point of view, relic shrines should act as medicine against moral decline. But if custodians themselves are weak in ethics, shrines can instead become symptoms of degeneration:

- Festivals dominated by loud music, drinking, and gambling.
- Leaders using ceremonies mainly to collect money or to show off.
- Shrines becoming tourist spots with very little real teaching or practice.

In such cases, relics are still present, but their moral voice becomes weak. The outer form of respect hides inner confusion. For peace studies, this is dangerous, because it means that people have less guidance in how to live peacefully with one another.

6.6 Political and Nationalist Misuse of Relics

Relics can be tied closely to national identity. Sometimes this can inspire pride and responsibility, but it can also create tension.

Problems can appear when:

1. One religion is linked too tightly to the state.
    - Political leaders may present themselves as the "protectors" of the relic and the religion.
    - Minority groups may feel excluded or afraid.
2. Relics are used in nationalist speeches.
    - Speakers may say that the relic proves the greatness of one nation or ethnic group.
    - They may hint that outsiders or minorities are a threat to the relic and to the nation.

3. Public rituals are turned into political theatre.
    - Leaders may appear at major relic festivals mainly for publicity.
    - Speeches may mix Dhamma language with political slogans.

From a Buddhist perspective, this is problematic because:

- It mixes worldly power with spiritual symbols in an unclear way.
- It can encourage us-versus-them thinking, which feeds hatred and fear.
- It distracts people from the real purpose of relic veneration: to remember the Buddha's qualities and to follow his path.

Peace-oriented custodians need to be aware of these risks and try to keep relic shrines as spaces of openness and compassion, not tools for narrow political goals.

6.7 Economic Pressures and Commercialisation

Economic forces also shape life around relic shrines. On the one hand, donations and visitor spending can support:

- Maintenance of the shrine.
- Education and charity projects.
- Local families who earn a living from guesthouses or shops.

On the other hand, strong commercial pressure brings dangers:

1. Shrine as marketplace
    - If the area near the relic is full of aggressive selling, noise, and clutter, the sacred atmosphere is damaged.
    - Pilgrims may feel they are treated mainly as customers, not as spiritual seekers.
2. Unequal benefits
    - A small group of people may control the main businesses and become very rich.
    - Poorer locals may feel exploited or pushed away from their own sacred place.
3. Pressure to change rituals
    - Festivals or ceremonies may be designed to attract more tourists rather than to support practice.
    - Traditional forms may be replaced by more “exciting” but less meaningful performances.

These problems can create resentment, jealousy, and suspicion inside the community. If they are not addressed, they can lead to open conflict.

For peacebuilding, it is important that custodians manage economic activity in a fair and transparent way, and always keep the spiritual purpose of the shrine at the centre.

6.8 Conflicts Inside the Buddhist Community

Not all conflicts around relics come from outside. Many start inside the Buddhist community itself.

Common sources of tension include:

1. Ritual differences
    - Different schools or lineages may have different chanting styles, offerings, or rules about who can approach the relic.
    - If one group insists that only their way is correct, others may feel disrespected.
2. Leadership struggles
    - Disputes about who should be the chief monk, abbot, or chairperson of the shrine committee.
    - Accusations of unfair elections, lack of consultation, or favouritism.
3. Doctrinal disagreements
    - Different views on meditation methods, interpretation of texts, or secondary teachings.
    - When tied to control of a relic shrine, these disagreements can become sharper.

4. Generational conflicts

    - Younger members may want new types of activities (youth groups, social projects, online teaching).

    - Older members may prefer traditional forms and feel that change is disrespectful.

If these conflicts are not handled with patience and listening, they can grow into lasting divisions, which harm both the community and the public image of Buddhism.

6.9 Peace-Oriented Custodianship: Preventing and Healing Conflicts

Given all these risks, what can relic custodians do? From a peace studies perspective, they can act as conflict preventers and peace healers.

Some key strategies include:

1. Early dialogue and transparency

- Create spaces for open discussion when small problems appear, before they grow into big conflicts.

- Share information about decisions, finances, and plans with the wider community.

- Encourage questions and respectful criticism.

When people feel informed and listened to, they are less likely to suspect hidden agendas.

2. Shared decision-making

- Include diverse voices (monks, nuns, lay men and women, different age groups, different ethnic or social groups) in advisory bodies.

- Use fair procedures for choosing leaders, such as clear rules and secret ballots if needed.

- Make important decisions in groups rather than by one person alone.

This reduces feelings of exclusion and helps spread responsibility.

3. Use of Buddhist principles in conflict resolution

- Apply teachings on loving-kindness, compassion, and right speech to actual disagreements.

- Encourage parties in conflict to see that clinging to “I”, “me”, and “mine” is often behind their anger.

- Remind everyone that schism and harsh speech bring serious harm to the sāsana.

In some cases, inviting respected elders or neutral monks to mediate can be very helpful.

4. Protecting sacred space from harmful influence

- Set clear rules about political speeches and campaign activities at the shrine.

- Limit commercial booths and advertising in the central sacred area.

- Keep the main relic space quiet and dignified, even during busy festivals.

This protects the core meaning of the site and reduces sources of tension.

5. Education for peace

- Use talks, classes, and posters to explain how greed, hatred, and delusion cause conflict, and how precepts and mental training support peace.

- Organise events that promote inter-group friendship, such as joint volunteer work, youth exchanges, or interfaith dialogues.

- Connect the story of the Buddha's relics with messages of non-violence and reconciliation.

When people understand the ethics behind the rituals, they are less likely to misuse sacred things.

6.10 Turning Crises into Opportunities

Sometimes conflicts cannot be prevented, and a crisis arises: public quarrels, accusations of corruption, protests, or even violence. While this is painful, it can also be a moment of learning.

If handled wisely, a crisis can lead to:

- Reform of structures – clearer rules, better financial systems, more participation.

- Personal reflection – leaders may see their own mistakes and change.

- Deeper understanding – the community may develop a more mature view of relics and religion, less focused on magic and status, more focused on ethics and practice.

From a Buddhist view, suffering can be a teacher. If custodians and communities face conflicts with honesty and humility, they can come out stronger and more peaceful.

6.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined the "shadow side" of relics and custodianship:

- Because relics have high symbolic, economic, and identity value, they can become centres of conflict.

- Early Buddhist warnings about schism show how dangerous divisions are for the welfare of many beings and for the survival of the sāsana.

- Ignorance, greed, and hatred can lead to superstition, commercialisation, and political misuse of the sacred.

- Moral degeneration in society can turn relic shrines into places of noise and business rather than peace and practice.

- Conflicts can arise inside the Buddhist community itself over ritual, leadership, and doctrine.

At the same time, we saw that peace-oriented custodianship offers many tools to prevent and heal such problems:

- Transparent communication and shared decision-making.
- Application of Dhamma principles to real conflicts.
- Protection of sacred space from harmful influences.
- Continuous education about ethics, non-violence, and the true purpose of relic veneration.

Taken together with the earlier chapters, this shows that custodians of Buddha's sacred relics stand at an important crossroads:

- They can either allow the sacred to be captured by worldly forces, leading to division and harm,
- Or they can use their position to serve the Dhamma, protect heritage, and build social harmony and peace.

Conclusion A Peace Studies Perspective on the Custodians of Buddha's Sacred Relics

7.1 Restating the Purpose

This research started with a simple but important question:

> *How do the custodians of Buddha's sacred relics act as agents of peace, cultural heritage protection, and social harmony?*

To answer this, we used only internal Buddhist sources: Pāli suttas and Vinaya, the *Questions of King Milinda*, and modern handbooks linked to a Buddha tooth relic museum. We read them through a peace studies lens, which looks at both *negative peace* (absence of violence) and *positive peace* (presence of justice, harmony, and well-being).

Step by step, the chapters showed that relics and their custodians are not just a side story in Buddhism. They stand at the point where faith, heritage, ethics, and peace meet.

7.2 Peace in Early Buddhism: Foundations for the Study

Chapter 1 asked a basic question: *Does early Buddhism really care about peace and social harmony, or only about personal liberation?*

From the internal sources, the answer was clear:

- The Buddha often thought of "security for beings" and acted in ways that did not oppress anyone, "either frail or firm."

- He taught methods for settling disputes in the Saṅgha, so that the holy life would last long "for the benefit and happiness of many beings… for the welfare of devas and humans."

- The Vinaya says that rules are made "for the excellence of the Order… for the restraint of evil-minded individuals… for the benefit of non-believers, for the increase of believers, for the maintenance of the True Dhamma, and for the furthering of Discipline."

These texts show that early Buddhism is deeply concerned with both inner peace and outer harmony. Nibbāna is described as peaceful, sorrowless, and safe, like an island or refuge. But at the same time, everyday rules and advice are given to protect the community and the wider world.

For peace studies, this means we do not need to "add" peace to Buddhism from outside. The concepts are already there: security for beings, concord in the Saṅgha, restraint of harmful behaviour, and long-term welfare for many.

7.3 Relics and Shrines: Meaning Beyond the Material

Chapter 2 turned from general peace concepts to the specific topic of Buddha's relics. We saw that:

- The Mahāparinibbāna tradition shows how the Buddha's remains were divided and enshrined in different places, so that many communities could honour him by building monuments.

- The *Questions of King Milinda* explains that the "general shop" of the Buddha includes the Word of the Buddha, the shrines of his bodily relics and the things he used, and the jewel of the Order – teaching, relics, and Saṅgha together.

- In the same text, Nāgasena uses a simile of the earth: relic shrines are like fertile ground where humans and devas can plant seeds of merit and practice that lead toward emancipation.

From this we learned that relic shrines are not only "containers for bones". They are supports for faith, memory, and practice. They encourage people to:

- Give generously

- Listen to the Dhamma

- Meditate and reflect

In peace studies language, they are spaces that can train peaceful hearts, by weakening greed and hatred and strengthening devotion and mindfulness.

7.4 Custodians as Guardians of the *Sāsana* and Heritage

Chapter 3 moved from relics themselves to the custodians who care for them: monks, nuns, lay committees, sometimes rulers and state bodies.

Using Vinaya and modern examples, we saw that:

- Sacred property in Buddhism is normally held in common by the Saṅgha, not as private wealth. Monks are trustees, not owners.

- Rules are given to protect both the inner discipline of monastics and the public trust of lay people.

- A modern tooth relic museum (described in our internal handbook) works as a centre of study (pariyatti), practice (paṭipatti), and realisation (paṭivedha), showing how relic custodianship today includes teaching Abhidhamma, dependent origination, and meditation.

In short, custodianship has several layers:

1. Material – protecting the physical relic, reliquary, and buildings.

2. Intangible – keeping alive stories, rituals, chants, and festivals.

3. Spiritual – guiding people from faith to understanding and practice.

4. Social – acting honestly, fairly, and peacefully, so that the community trusts both the shrine and the sāsana.

Seen in this way, relic custodians are truly guardians of the sāsana and of cultural heritage. Their work shapes how people see the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha in daily life.

7.5 Relics, Ethics, and Everyday Harmony

Chapter 4 and 5 showed that relics are deeply linked with ethics and social life.

As cultural heritage, relic shrines:

- Hold collective memory of the Buddha and of local history.
- Form the heart of community identity at local, ethnic, and even pan-Buddhist levels.
- Provide a focus for rituals and festivals where people practise generosity, respect, and cooperation.

As moral classrooms, relic shrines:

- Are places where lay people regularly take the five precepts, especially during festivals and full-moon days.
- Remind people of impermanence and the shortness of life, encouraging them to live wisely.
- Encourage giving (dāna), which weakens greed and builds solidarity.

Modern handbooks linked to relic institutions explain the five precepts as a kind of social protection system, warning of the consequences of intoxication such as quarrels, illness, and loss of reputation. When these teachings are heard again and again at a

respected shrine, they can influence both personal behaviour and community norms.

From a peace studies view, this means relic shrines can support:

- Negative peace – less violence, fewer quarrels, less harm caused by alcohol and abuse.

- Positive peace – more trust, more fairness, more spaces where people feel safe and respected.

7.6 Risks: Conflict, Schism, and Misuse

Chapter 6 explored the dark side of sacred symbols. Because relics have strong symbolic, economic, and identity value, they can easily become centres of conflict.

The internal sources warn that:

- Schism in the Saṅgha is one of the most serious wrongs. It brings unhappiness to many beings and damages faith. Concord is praised as a great blessing.

- Ignorance and wrong view turn religion into superstition. People may believe that offering to relics can erase bad actions without real change in behaviour.

- Modern handbooks speak about moral degeneration, where intoxicants, greed, and carelessness increase in society.

These problems can be linked to relics when:

- Groups fight over control of a shrine and its income.

- Political leaders use relics to support nationalist or exclusive agendas.

- Commercial interests turn sacred spaces into noisy marketplaces.

- Ritual is separated from ethics, so people focus on offerings and “blessings” but ignore the precepts.

From a peace perspective, this shows that relic custodianship is a high-risk role. If custodians lack wisdom and integrity, relics can feed division, injustice, and mistrust instead of peace.

7.7 A Model of Peace-Oriented Relic Custodianship

Bringing together all chapters, we can now describe a simple model of peace-oriented custodianship in Buddhism.

A peace-oriented custodian:

1. Stands on Buddhist foundations

    - Remembers that the Buddha often thought of “security for beings” and did not oppress anyone.

    - Sees Nibbāna as the highest peace, described as safe, sorrowless, and free.

    - Understands that the purpose of relics is to support the path to this peace.

2. Honours all three treasures in balance
    - Does not separate relics from the Word of the Buddha and the Saṅgha, as the *Milinda* text teaches.
    - Uses relic shrines as gateways to teaching and practice, not as ends in themselves.
3. Protects both material and intangible heritage
    - Guards the physical relic and shrine carefully.
    - Keeps stories, rituals, chants, and festivals meaningful and in line with Dhamma.
    - Avoids turning the shrine into either a museum with no life or a market with no dignity.
4. Lives and promotes ethical discipline
    - Personally keeps the precepts and avoids intoxication and dishonesty.
    - Supports clear, transparent management of donations.
    - Encourages the community to take precepts and reflect on their actions.
5. Builds inclusive and fair community structures
    - Involves different groups (monastics, lay people, young and old, different backgrounds) in decision-making.

- Tries to solve conflicts through dialogue and patience, following Buddhist teachings on right speech and loving-kindness.

- Refuses to use relics as tools for political or ethnic exclusion.

6. Uses the shrine as a centre for peace education

    - Connects relic stories with teachings on non-violence, compassion, and wisdom.

    - Offers programmes that address real social problems: violence, addiction, corruption, discrimination.

    - Encourages people to see the link between inner peace and social harmony.

This model shows that being a relic custodian is truly a peacebuilding role. It requires both spiritual depth and practical skills.

7.8 Contributions to Peace Studies and Buddhist Studies

Even though this research used only internal sources, it suggests some contributions to both peace studies and Buddhist studies.

For peace studies, it shows that:

- Buddhist texts contain rich material on conflict resolution, institutional harmony, and social welfare, not only on personal meditation.

- Religious heritage sites can be analysed as peace infrastructures – places that can support positive peace if

managed wisely.

- A focus on relic custodians helps us see how everyday religious roles can become peace roles.

For Buddhist studies, it highlights that:

- Relic worship, often judged from outside as "only ritual", is closely tied to the path of merit and liberation in texts like the *Milindapañhā*.

- Modern institutions such as tooth relic museums are natural developments of old patterns: they connect relics with study, meditation, and communal life.

- The Vinaya's reasons for rules can be read as an early theory of religious-ethical governance aimed at long-term survival of the sāsana and the protection of public faith.

7.9 Practical Recommendations

Based on this study, some practical suggestions can be made for those involved in relic custodianship today:

1. Strengthen ethical training
    - Offer regular courses on the five precepts and the mental roots of actions.
    - Encourage custodians and committee members to join retreats and Dhamma classes.

2. Improve transparency and shared leadership
    - Publish simple financial reports.
    - Use clear procedures for choosing leaders.
    - Involve different groups in decisions about festivals, building projects, and major changes.
3. Protect sacred atmosphere while allowing access
    - Set reasonable rules (dress, noise, no alcohol) that protect the dignity of the shrine but do not exclude the poor or visitors from other cultures.
    - Keep at least some times and spaces free from commercial activity.
4. Promote inclusive identity
    - Emphasise that relics are gifts for all beings, not symbols of one group's superiority.
    - Welcome respectful visitors from other religions and countries.
    - Avoid political speeches in the sacred area.
5. Use relic stories to teach peace
    - Connect the division of relics and sharing of stupas with lessons about fairness and unity.

    - Link the Buddha's qualities (compassion, patience, wisdom) to modern peace challenges in families, schools, and societies.

7.10 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This research has some clear limits:

- It used only internal texts and handbooks. It did not include fieldwork at real relic shrines, interviews with custodians, or observation of living communities.

- It focused on Theravāda sources and one modern tooth relic museum. Other Buddhist traditions might have different views and practices.

- It used a peace studies interpretation, which is one lens among many. Other lenses, such as gender studies or post-colonial studies, could highlight other important questions.

Future research could:

- Study particular relic shrines "on the ground" and compare how closely they follow the peace-oriented model suggested here.

- Compare Theravāda relic practices with those in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions.

- Explore how relic custodians cooperate with other religions and secular heritage bodies in multi-faith societies.

Even with these limits, the internal sources already give a strong base for seeing relic custodianship as a serious peace task.

7.11 Final Reflection

The Buddha's relics are small and fragile things: pieces of bone, teeth, ashes, or objects of use. Yet around them, whole worlds of meaning grow: stupas, stories, rituals, festivals, museums, and communities.

This thesis has argued that these worlds of meaning are not neutral. They can either support greed, rivalry, and pride, or they can support generosity, concord, and wisdom. The difference lies largely in the hands and hearts of the custodians.

When custodians remember the Buddha's thought of security for beings, when they act with honesty and compassion, when they use relic sites to teach ethics and peace, they help turn relic shrines into living sources of social harmony. In this way, the relics do not just point back to the Buddha's past. They also point forward, toward a future where Buddhist faith, cultural heritage, and peace studies can work together for the welfare and happiness of many beings.

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SuttaPiṭaka selections

Short readings

Salāyatanavagga-aṭṭhakathā (Commentary on the Salāyatanavagga).